

# RAISING LEARNERS' GLOBAL AWARENESS THROUGH THE USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of authentic real-world materials in arousing more interest in world events among Japanese college students, who tend to be introverted and indifferent to events outside Japan—especially in the business world. It is thus hoped that the results of this intervention implementing business-related materials will help prepare them to enter the workforce. The frequently mentioned downside of authentic materials is that they are often difficult to understand if learners are not at an advanced level. The study was conducted in a semester-long class in business content for English majors in which learners read articles in newspapers and magazines and listened to interviews, recorded in English, with famous people mainly in the business field. The results are two-fold. First, the application of certain pedagogical techniques was successful in abating the difficulty of understanding the authentic materials; suggestions are provided on how to successfully use authentic materials in the classroom. Second, the learners' feedback shows that they developed an interest in world events on the basis of the instruction using the authentic materials but that they did not necessarily view this knowledge as beneficial for entering the workforce. This suggests the necessity for further research into learner expectations regarding the working world.

## I. Introduction

Course syllabus and content are key to meeting students' learning needs. This paper describes a syllabus design for a university EFL class in Japan, with particular focus on using authentic real-world English materials such as speeches, interviews, newspaper articles, and magazines. Authentic material refers here to material that has been "produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language" (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989, p. 25). The purpose of this study is to learn whether using authentic real-world materials in EFL classes would increase students' awareness of world events and improve their readiness for job hunting.

Japanese students are becoming increasingly indifferent to studying abroad, and fewer are doing so every year (Fig.1). They are said to be indifferent to events occurring outside Japan. Young people tend to be somewhat introverted, and are

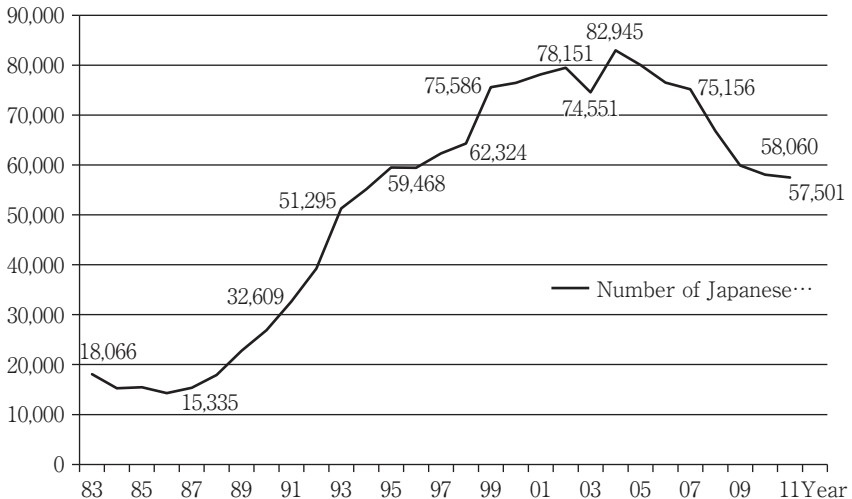


Fig. 1. Number of Japanese Students Studying Abroad by Year

Note. Taken from MEXT (2014), using data from "Education at a Glance" (OECD) and "Open Doors" (UNESCO Statistics Bureau, IIE).

interested only in what is happening around them, such as local events. This tendency has been mentioned frequently in recent media coverage, even though the government has been promoting globally competent human resources. This has caused many older Japanese people to fear that Japan may be left behind by the international community.

In fact, the number of Japanese students studying abroad at the college level has declined as shown in Figure 1. This downward trend has continued for the past 10 years, since 2004, when the number of students studying abroad peaked at 82,945. In 2010, 58,060 students studied abroad, and this number dropped to 57,501 in 2011.

In order to promote study abroad to advancing the globalization of Japanese universities, the government has been increasing its funding for grants and scholarships. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) offers support through the “Japanese Government Scholarship,” and the “Project for Establishing a University Network for Internationalization,” together with other ministries. The “Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (Global 30 Plus)” grant was designed to boost the number of students who go to foreign universities (MEXT, January 20, 2012).

This recent trend of increasing reluctance among students to go abroad is said to be attributable to the practice of job hunting in Japan. University students begin to search for jobs in the second semester (December) of their third year of study.<sup>1</sup> Some students are afraid that if they go abroad for one year, they may be too late for job hunting in Japan. In addition, students tend to place more emphasis on English qualification tests than on studying abroad. They want to achieve high scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), because successful completion of this test is considered an advantage in job hunting, as some companies require their job applicants to have a certain score, and may even make it a condition of employment. Accordingly, some students set a high TOEIC score as their goal for learning English. With regard to English studies, this may seem a good goal. However, to become well-educated members of the workforce, students must view their language learning with a more long-term purpose in mind.

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<sup>1</sup>Effective with the 2015 academic year, this process will be moved back to March, which is the last month of students' third year of study.

To engage students' minds in a broader view of the world, authentic real-world materials based on world events and influential ideas were employed in the EFL class given in this study. One often-noted negative aspect of authentic materials is that many of them are too difficult to understand, for students who are not at an advanced level. The syllabus designed for this class incorporates authentic content into the students' tasks, activities, and exercises, and so makes the material accessible to all learners.

## 2 Methods

### *2.1 Study Aims*

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of using authentic real-world materials to increase Japanese college students' interest in world events—mainly events related to business—and, consequently, to help prepare them to enter the workforce.

### *2.2 Study Procedure*

The study was conducted using the following procedure:

1. A total of 23 students attended the class (in two groups) for one semester in which they read articles in world newspapers and magazines, and listened to interviews and speeches by famous people who were mainly from the business field.
2. To collect learner feedback, at the end of the course students were asked to complete a questionnaire with three questions:

#### Question 1

Had their exposure to these authentic materials changed their perspectives and awareness of world events?

#### Question 2

Had taking this class increased their readiness for job hunting to help them enter the workforce?

#### Question 3

What topics did they wish to read and listen to in class?

3. The data were analyzed, and the study findings were compiled.

### ***2.3 Participants***

The participants of this study attended a university in Japan that has a good reputation in practical education, and a high percentage of students who achieve various professional qualifications. The participants were third-year English major students. All of them had spent at least eight years learning English in school, and at least one or two semesters in an EFL program in the United States. Their English proficiency ranged from basic to intermediate (low intermediate to high intermediate). In keeping with the trend among Japanese college students mentioned above, the students in this study did not show an interest in what was happening in the world.

At the university, English for general purposes (EGP) courses are provided for first- and second-year students, and English for special purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) are taught to third- and fourth-year students. Beginning in their third year, students choose one specialization from the following three options: English Literature, English Linguistics, or English Business Communication. Most of the students in this study belonged to the English Business Communication stream.

### ***2.4 The Class in this Study***

The classes in this study were conducted in the 2013 academic year, from April 2013 to July 2013. The class met once a week for 90 minutes, and the students had a total of 15 lessons during the semester.

The main objectives of the class were:

- To enhance the students' English skills by reading news reports in international newspapers and magazines, watching and listening to news programs, interviews, and speeches, and discussing what they read and watched.
- To expand students' interests beyond their own country, enhance their knowledge of world events, and consolidate their position as future businesspersons capable of being part of the international business community.

### ***2.5 Authentic Materials***

Authenticity “refers to the use of spoken and written material that has been produced for purposes of communication not for purpose of language teaching” (Nunan, 2004, p. 49). “ ‘Authentic materials’ refers to the use in teaching of texts, photographs, video selections, and other teaching resources that were not specially prepared for pedagogical purposes” (Richards, 2001, p. 252). Based on a survey of the literature, Richards (2001) summarizes the advantages of using authentic materials as follows:

- “They have a positive effect on learner motivation.”
- “They provide authentic cultural information about the target culture.”
- “They provide exposure to real language.”
- “They relate more closely to learners’ needs.”
- “They support a more creative approach to teaching.” (pp. 252-253).

Further, Spelleri (2002) adds:

- They can offer real language used in the real world, and so are rich in culture and context.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of using authentic materials are that “authentic materials often contain difficult language” (Richards, 2001, p. 253), and often they move along too fast and include ungrammatical expressions, which causes learners to become confused and feel stressed, and possibly demotivated, especially for learners at lower levels (Guariento & Morley, 2001). From the teachers’ perspectives, finding authentic materials suitable for learners is difficult, time-consuming, and can become burdensome. For these reasons, the effectiveness and appropriateness of using authentic materials in the classroom has been an ongoing controversy. Nevertheless, because authentic materials deal with current global issues, they can have a powerful influence on learners. Keeping these aspects in mind, this class was conducted in the hope that students’ awareness of world events would improve, and subsequently, their readiness for job hunting.

The reading materials used in class were:

- The government encouraging Japanese students to study abroad
- Zara's strategy of international business
- UNIQLO's CEO, Tadashi Yanai
- Grameen Bank
- Apparel companies in the Bangladesh tragedy
- Starbucks' tax issues
- Rakuten's Englishnization
- Ms. Powell Jobs' philanthropic stage
- Mr. Abe's economic plan

The audio materials used in class were:

- Dr. Yunus' Nobel Prize acceptance speech
- Mr. Steve Jobs' Stanford University commencement speech
- An interview with Pepsi CEO Indra Nooyi about "performance with purpose"
- An interview with Sony CEO Hirai on the future of Sony
- An interview with Rakuten CEO Mikitani about adopting English as the official company language

## ***2.6 Teaching method of the class***

This section provides details on how the classes were generally conducted in this course. One class that focused on reading is described here as an example.

A newspaper article about tragic incidents of apparel companies that have been taking place consecutively in Bangladesh was assigned to read in advance. Students were instructed to prepare for the class thoroughly, by reading it intensively and checking unfamiliar vocabulary. Also, they were expected to be able to summarize the content in English. This ensured that students would take time to try to understand the content and take part in the discussion in class.

In class, the students were told to form pairs or groups of three to discuss the article content. This was done to confirm their understanding of the article. Next, a volunteer pair or group came to the front of the classroom and explained the content to the whole

class. The instructor then corrected any possible mistakes in their explanation. Working with a pair or a group in advance helps to clear differences in students' understanding and reduce their anxiety of speaking up, and to encourage their active participation in class. Especially given students' current tendency to hold back and be introverted in class, the instructor relied heavily on the interactive and proactive learning styles.

When the students explained the contents, the instructor instructed them to do so paragraph by paragraph. The concept and role of a paragraph in English writing is not understood thoroughly among the students, and since they were in the process of learning paragraph writing, the instructor consciously instructed them to read the article with a focus on the paragraph level. This is expected to help students to be more aware of and to have deeper understanding of the role of a paragraph in English writing, and consequently, this will help prepare the students to write papers in English.

After the students' explanation, the instructor added more information on the article content. Then the discussion was conducted with the whole class. This allowed the students to gain a full understanding of the article; some of them were surprised to learn of the harsh working situations in apparel companies—the companies whose clothes they like to wear and find fashionable. By reading this article, the students experienced a connection with these people and the problems they faced; they were no longer indifferent toward them. Thus, a link was established between the students and the world, and their understanding and awareness of global issues were broadened.

### 3. Results

#### ***3.1 Teaching Recommendations***

Teaching the class using the abovementioned materials brought me to the realization that certain practices could help in alleviating the disadvantages of authentic materials, which are considered to be difficult and hence demotivating. Based on my experience, the following recommendations are made: First, instructors should start with materials about products or commodities that the students like and feel they have a connection to, something they use in daily life. For example, Zara, UNIQLO, a casual wear



designer, manufacturer, and retailer, Rakuten, an electronic commerce and Internet company, and Steve Jobs.

Prior to listening to an interview or speech, the students were assigned a reading on the same topic (authentic reading materials are preferable, but if they are unavailable, reading from the textbook will still give solid information). Because the assigned reading will help students understand the speech content better, instructors should first increase their background knowledge of the topic, and stimulate their interest in listening to the interviews and speeches. For example, students were asked to read about Steve Jobs and then listen to his speech. Similarly, one could read about Englishnization in Rakuten, and then listen to Rakuten CEO Mikitani's interview.

Instructors should use related materials to deepen the students' understanding of what they have read and heard, and so expand their interests. For example, one could assign an article on UNIQLO's CEO, Yanai, and then another article about the social business that Yanai conducts with Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Next, the class could read an article about Grameen Bank and Dr. Yunus, followed by an article about apparel companies in the Bangladesh tragedy, and finally, listen to Dr. Yunus' speech. Alternatively, one could continually read articles on Starbucks' and Amazon's tax issues. Another interesting choice would be reading an article about Steve Jobs, then listening to his speech, and finally, reading an article about Powell Jobs' philanthropic stage.

Another important consideration is providing the students with the transcripts after they have listened to the interviews or speeches. This enables students to confirm what they have heard, and gives them confidence in their understanding. Also, one should allow them to listen to the materials again, either while or after reading the transcript. If a transcript is not available, students can be organized into groups under the instruction to write down what is being said as they listen to the interviews and speeches. After the students create a transcript, it must be checked for accuracy. If this task is too time-consuming, the instructor can prepare the transcription. In any case, it is necessary to provide the students with a correct transcript.

### ***3.2 Learner Feedback***

The students' responses to the questions asked in the survey are summarized in this section.

#### **Question 1**

Had their exposure to these authentic materials changed their perspectives and awareness of world events?

All the participants answered yes.

The positive comments from the participants who replied yes are as follows:

- Most of the topics taught in class were new to me. I realized the necessity of paying attention to what's happening in the world.
- I never knew that companies contributed so much to society. They do not just make profit.
- I realized that all the topics taught in class were well-known, and I realized how ignorant and indifferent to the world I had been.
- I had heard of most of these people but did not know what they or the companies do.
- I now watch news programs on TV and read newspapers. (This comment was made by all the learners.)

#### **Question 2**

Had taking this class increased their readiness for job hunting to help them enter the workforce?

More than half of the participants answered yes.

The participants explained how their preparation to enter the workforce was influenced with the following comments.

- After learning about companies that have been successful, I want to look for companies like that.
- I want to pay more attention to the ideas of top executives, which I have never paid attention to before.
- Learning about these companies inspired me to do company research, which I am interested in.

- Knowing that even famous business people who have succeeded in their fields experienced setbacks encouraged me.

However, there were some negative comments stating the class had not changed to an extent that would influence their readiness to enter workforce.

- It was useful to learn about society, but I can't relate it to my job hunt.
- All the companies I learned about in class were large and famous ones, and I would not apply at such companies. Or, even if I did apply, I would not be hired. So, I was not able to link what I did in the class with my own job hunting.

### Question 3

What topics did they wish to read and listen to in class?

Other topics that the students recommended for further study included the following:

- Japanese companies that make advances in the world
- Different strategies used by the same company in different countries (e.g., UNIQLO)
- Companies other than Rakuten that adopt English as their official language
- Airlines and the tourism industry in Japan
- Presentations by famous people, such as company executives
- More about Japanese companies and successful business professionals
- Foreign companies in Japan
- Foreigners working in Japan
- Japanese companies that play an important role in the world
- Small and medium sized companies in Japan
- Successful female CEOs
- Venture companies in Japan
- Japanese companies that are expected to see major growth

## 4 Discussion and Summary

This study was conducted in order to awaken the minds of students learning business English communication to a broader view of the world, using authentic real-world materials based on current world events and topical ideas in class. The negative aspects of using authentic materials mentioned earlier were abated somewhat by applying some techniques.

Based on student responses, it can be concluded that studying authentic materials was somewhat successful in increasing the students' interests in world events. However, it was not entirely effective in increasing their awareness and readiness for job hunting. This is because students were not able to associate what they read, listened, and watched in class with their own thoughts in preparation for entering the workforce.

Overall, the students were satisfied with the class and seemed to have become more motivated to study current affairs and business-related topics. Nevertheless, almost all the topics they suggested were about Japanese companies or Japanese-related issues when they were asked what topics they wished to read or listened to in class. Thus, their main interests remained with Japanese companies. Greater effort is therefore needed to evoke their interest in global issues. It is hoped that learning with authentic materials will influence their attitudes toward job hunting over time, and help them consider different points of view from wider perspectives when they are ready to think of entering the workforce.

This paper is based on a presentation entitled, "Enhancing Students' Interest in World Incidents through Authentic Materials," which the author presented at TESOL 2014 International Convention in March 2014, in Portland, USA.

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